

CHAPTER FOUR

TOWARDS A NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TURKISH CINEMA

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Introduction: Questions and Approaches

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periodisation, and discursive practices of Turkish film historiography have evolved since the publication of Nijat Özön's *Türk Sinema Tarihi* (*History of Turkish Cinema*) that first came out in 1962. Since then the periodisation indexed to political events, attention to auteur-style directors, and the differentiation of film genres can all be traced back to Özön. In time, new writers of film history emerged who preferred to use archival material to go back to the roots of film screenings in Turkey. Burçak Evren (1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1998), Alican Sekmeç, Ali Özuyar (2008), Özde Çeliktemel-Thomen (2013) along with Agah Özgüç (2012) belong to this school of writing. Lastly, English-language histories of Turkish cinema came out in the 2000s. Aslı Daldal (2003), Dilek Kaya (2007), Gönül Dönmez-Colin (2008), Asuman Suner (2010), Savaş Arslan (2010), Canan Balan (2010), Murat Akser (2010) and Eylem Atakav (2013) all examined the new methodological possibilities in the writing of Turkish film history. This article will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and explore new ways of historical writing on cinema. The changing discourse of Turkish historiography can trace a route from structuralist/modernist to post-structuralist approaches (even post-colonial, with Nezi̇h Erdoğan, 1998). The careful division of history marked by turning points/eras, emphasis on the nation-state, and the exclusion of minority cinemas (Özön, Scognamillo) are trademarks of the modernist period in Turkish film historiography. Acceptance of the existence of "new" cinemas, other modes of production and minority (Kurdish, gay, diasporic) works represents the post-structuralist mode of film historiography.

In this article, the main aim is to suggest and search for new methods for writing the history of Turkish cinema. Film studies and history both belong to the field of humanities and as such their methods are more analytical than quantitative. On the other hand, in social science research, the search for an answer begins with research design, that is to say, searching for a methodology for research, a research outline and a research question. The writing of the history of Turkish cinema requires a joint effort: A bringing together of the humanities with the methodologies of social science research. Currently, Turkish cinema studies and history writing are carried out according to the research interests of the people who are studying Turkish cinema. Especially in recent studies, there has been a tendency to present the existing literature repeatedly without going back to their roots (Özden 2009). Every writer of Turkish film history accepts Rakım Çalapala's (1946) or Nurullah Tilgen's (1957) version of events before the 1960s in Turkish film history, although both writers produced texts that can be classified as secondary sources in history writing (i.e., memoirs). In this way, new books and theses are produced based on subjective points of view that summarise these secondary texts (Hakan 2010).

Other attempts to write about Turkish film history have also, to a certain extent, relied on secondary readings and sometimes almost exclusively on memories. Zahir Güvemli wrote a now long-forgotten book on Turkish and world cinema in 1960. The next attempt to chronicle Turkish cinema was made by Giovanni Scognamillo, who first published his work on Turkish film directors in 1973. Scognamillo then went on to extend his work to cover the entire history of Turkish cinema. In 1988, his two-volume history of Turkish cinema was released by Metis Publishing. He later revised his work in 1998, condensing it into a single volume published by Kabalcı. The text is still used today as the primary reference for researchers of Turkish film history after being revised and updated twice, in 2003 and 2010. Other scholars such as Mustafa Gökmen (1989) and Oğuz Makal (1991) wrote their own versions of Turkish film history from the sources available to them.

Özön and his predecessor Scognamillo (1987a, 1987b) are modernist historians who view history as a progression toward better times. They tell a grand narrative of losses, victories, firsts, clearly-defined eras and great warriors. The division of film history into eras by Özön in 1962 can be used to illustrate this point. Özön divides his timeline into eight sections:

- The emergence of motion pictures (1896-1914)
- First feature-length films (1914-1922)

- The era of theatre actors (1922-1924)
- The Muhsin Ertuğrul era (1928-1939)
- The transition period (1939-1950)
- The filmmakers' era (1950-1960)
- Documentary filmmaking
- The film industry

Nijat Özön's periodisation is that of a progression of history into clear-cut eras with certain directors leading the way. His subheadings, such as "The Wasted Years" or "The Eighth Wonder of the World: Turkish Censorship," can be read as representing ideals of a modernist-nationalist Turkish intellectual's comments on the progression of history, which oftentimes runs against his own wishes. History is constructed through theory, and a historian is part of the era and the conditions in which he lives; it is thus only natural that he expresses his point of view in the creation of his writing.

Scognamiglio's periodisation of Turkish film history is similar to Özön's except that he adds a post-1960s era to his analysis:

- Social Realism/National Cinema (1960-1970)
- Political Cinema/Yılmaz Güney (1970-1981)
- Art Cinema (1982-1994)
- New Cinema (1994-now)

Scognamiglio continues the idea of a progression of film history based on heroes (construed as directors). In this conceptualisation, Metin Erksan, Halit Refiğ, Yılmaz Güney, Ömer Kavur and Nuri Bilge Ceylan represented the decades of filmmaking as a totality. There are also certain journalistic segments in the book. Film genres and the lives of actors and actresses are included throughout the study, partially in an attempt to popularise the book for the general reading public, and the work is bolstered by hundreds of photos from each period.

More recently, Agah Özgüç published a series of journal articles, which divide Turkish cinema into thematic topics. Notably, all of the data was personally collected by the author and then turned into encyclopaedic works: *Dictionary of Turkish Film Producers* (1996), *Dictionary of Turkish Film Directors* (2003), and *Dictionary of Turkish Films* (2012). Özgüç's ability to collect and classify is uncanny, and his studies are painstakingly composed of dates and the names of screenwriters, editors and producers of films. This data was first compiled in CD format in 1998 (in Microsoft's *Cinemanía* style) and designed by the company, 3. Boyut,

as a CD-Rom (*100 Türk Filmi / CD-ROM*), and began to be used as a primary source by university libraries in the early 2000s.

In a similar vein, film director Metin Erksan's stance on Turkish film history comes from the point of view of political developments. Erksan looks at developments in Turkish film history as reactions made in response to state policy. Whenever new regimes come to power, they create their own laws governing cinema through censorship or bans. The time frame that Erksan creates is as follows:

- 1895-1923 (establishment of the Turkey as a Republic in 1923)
- 1923-1932 (censorship law enacted in 1932)
- 1932-1939 (new censorship law in 1939)
- 1939-1945 (multi-party politics begin in 1945)
- 1945-1950 (first free elections in 1950)
- 1950-1960 (May 27 military coup in 1960)
- 1960-1971 (March 12 military intervention in 1971)
- 1971-1980 (September 12 military coup in 1980)
- 1980-1986 (new cinema law in 1986)
- 1986-1994 (current period)

(Önder and Baydemir 2005, 115-16)

Such a classification is useful in that it brings to the fore different aspects of historical moments as well as alternative ways of looking at the development of Turkish cinema and new methodologies. As stated above, the problem with modernist Turkish film history is that Özön's method has become the norm but the validity of his methodology has not been questioned by those historians who followed his example. Today, Turkish film history could be written from a variety of perspectives, including cultural, economic, industrial and technological, and could also take into account the ways film is exhibited, formal approaches, the stars themselves, and the archaeology of film. Seçil Büker (2010) mentions a variety of approaches in her essay on film history. She refers to several film historians (Elsaesser 1986; 2004) that treat film history as a process in the making rather than something fixed in the past (Büker 2010, 22). The history of film technology can be explored as Edward Branigan (1976) does in his analysis of the advent of colour in cinema. Douglas Gomery (1976) takes up an industrial model, Robert Sklar (1993) utilises cultural history and Jack Ellis (1979), Allen and Gomery (1985), David Bordwell (2008), Barry Salt (2009), Gomery and Pafort-Overduin (2011) study the history of film style. There are also historians who have written large-scale historical accounts of the field such as Pam Cook (1999), Robert Sklar

(2001), Gianetti and Eyman (2001), David Cook (2004), David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2009). Bordwell and Thompson (2009) classify ways of looking into film history, which can be biographical, industrial, economic, aesthetic, technological and social/cultural/political. Studies in archaeological micro-history attempt to recover lost history as in Sobchack's (2000) description of how Peter Brosnan dug into the sand of Guadalupe to discover the lost film set of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) or Robert Allen's digital humanities project called "Going to the Show" that documents film-going experience in North Carolina from the introduction of motion pictures in 1896 to the end of the silent film era in 1930. Similar attempts to recover lost history are being made by Bilkent University (turkishcine.ma) and İstanbul Şehir University (www.tsa.org.tr) in 2014.

Some Fundamental Questions

So what should a historian of Turkish cinema do? Let us first start by asking these questions:

1. *What are the criteria used to date Turkish films? Which Turkish films were produced in which years? Which is the original version of each film?* Do we see censored or uncensored version of these films? There have been attempts to preserve films by film archives such as TÜRVAK of Türker İnanoğlu, Horizon International and the Ministry of Culture that give answers to these questions related to authenticating films.
2. *Where are these films? How can we access them?* Many of these films are located in special archives such as the Mimar Sinan University's Film and TV Institute, but they are not easily accessible.
3. *Who has the director credit?* Özgüç points out that with television sales of films, the producers often tamper with credits replacing the names of directors with their own names. So, watching the TV version of a film may mislead us in what we really know about the identity/credits of the movie.
4. *Is there a verifiable film database where we can access information about films and their crews?* Currently, there are websites on Turkish cinema with detailed content such as sinematurk.com. These websites have been created in the image of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), but their reliability is still questionable. The creation of a national film registry could easily solve the problem of verification.
5. *How can copyright problems be solved?* For film scholars and

researchers, the fair use of films in DVD and data format should be allowed by regulation and by law.

6. *How can we access other primary sources?* Other sources must be made accessible through archives, museums, research centres and libraries. Film set still photographs, company balance sheets, import-export records, posters and screenplays should be made available to researchers. One such service has recently been provided by Necip Sarıcı of Lale Film who has been collecting film-related material since 1949. He has created access to 150 feature film negatives, 250 prints, 5,000 books and 65,000 film stills (Tokuşoğlu 2012).
7. *What about existing films that have not been covered by previous film histories?* This difficulty should not hinder the attempts of researchers. There are private archivists out there, people who would trust the researcher with good intent. But in some cases good intentions may lead to the loss of precious films. In 2008 it was discovered that the original film negative of *Selvi Boylum, Al Yazmalım* (dir. Atıf Yılmaz, 1977) was lost. The broadcaster who owned the rights to the film took the original film negative from the MSU archives and never returned it. After a government-friendly newspaper made an issue of this loss, the Ministry of Culture ordered a search of the broadcaster's archives located the lost film negative (Güven 2008). The film has now been restored and there is a new print available to the general public. But how could we recover a film not previously covered in film histories? There is a number of ways in which this might be achieved, for example, in examining the records of production companies as all payments made to film crew are recorded:
 - a. Records of the production company: All payments made to film crew are recorded. Since records are kept of all payment (in which archives?) this can give an idea of what a film's production process may have been like
 - b. Records of the director: The person who works closest to the production team has access to important archival materials.
 - c. Memories of actors and crew members: Oral history projects can unravel these mysteries, just like a puzzle.
 - d. Small bits and pieces left at film labs: Even a sequence left from a film can be preserved and classified for further use.

Determination of Primary Sources

Primary sources are considered to be the main source of film history studies. In Turkish cinema history writing, the primary sources could be

listed as the:

- Screening copy of a film
- Director's cut of the negative copy
- Shooting script of the film
- Memories of the director and employees (cast and crew)
- Publications, laws and regulations about cinema
- Censor office records
- Official municipal tax records
- Ticket receipt records of movie theatres
- Film critiques in newspapers and magazines
- Economic data, balance sheets, import and export records
- Distribution company records

More could be added to this list, but my focus here was on primary sources.

Historiographical Methodology

The first thing to do is create a complete list of the Turkish films produced until today. To that end, a national registry of films could be created by the Ministry of Culture. Currently, it is impossible to ascertain the production date of a Turkish film. Different encyclopaedias and histories of Turkish cinema show that films like Metin Erksan's *Sevmek Zamanı* (Time to Love) and *Kuyu* (The Well) and Halit Refiğ's *Bir Türk'e Gönül Verdim* (I Lost My Heart to a Turk) were produced in different years ranging from 1966 to 1969. So how do we ascribe the correct date in film histories? Is it the screening date, the date of completion or the date a film got a green light from the censorship board?

How American and British film institutions deal with these questions can shed light on Turkish historians' problems. The American Film Institute (AFI), the British Film Institute (BFI), and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) register films released each year and prepare catalogues (*The AFI Catalog of Feature Films*). UCLA has a large archive that allows access to these documents as well as to the AMPAS library. The Library of Congress also contributes to the preservation of prints of films deemed to be national treasures. TÜRSAK and Ministry of Culture of Turkey work to store and restore films located at the Taksim Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM) as a national film archive project in Ankara which we hope will give similar access to film historians in Turkey.

Let us now look at what could or should be done to avert some of the difficulties encountered by Turkish film historians.

1. *Pre-history should be studied.* Turkish Cinema exists in two main periods: between the years 1895-1928 and the post-1928 era. The main criterion here is the transition to the Latin alphabet. Those who want to investigate pre-1928 resources need to learn how to read the Ottoman (Arabic) script.
2. *Historical geography matters.* The history of Turkish cinema studies is divided into the two geographical categories of pre- and post-1923; referring to these timeframes means before and after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. This is both a geographical and ideological problem. When the Republic of Turkey was founded it was limited to the borders referred to as the *Misak-ı Milli* (a document outlining borders drawn by the founding fathers) rejecting the heritage of the Ottoman Empire. However, films produced between 1895 and 1923 are arguably interpreted as belonging to the first quarter of the Turkish history of cinema. As this requires in-depth research that takes into account multicultural, multinational and multilingual cinemas, other languages must be learnt as well. For example, films by the Manaki Brothers belong to belong to Turkish as well as Macedonian film history.
3. *The first film thesis is wrong.* Narrowing the beginning of Turkish cinema to *The Destruction of St. Stephanos Monument/Ayastefanos Abidesinin Yıkılışı* (1914) limits the beginning of Turkish cinema to a nationalist, Turkish, Muslim identity and rejects previous attempts at filmmaking and exhibition by Ottoman minority groups such as the Greeks and the Armenians. The existence of the 1914 film itself is debated by scholars today (see Kaya Mutlu 2007).
4. *Archives and digitisation are needed.* Without the documentation of all the books and magazines on Turkish cinema, it is impossible to write a complete history of Turkish cinema. Recently, efforts by Nezi̇h Erdoğan led to the creation of an online database of Turkish cinema documents (<http://arsivsinemaseyir.com>). Other websites that list the publications on film such as (kameraarkasi.org) list a bibliography of the past and updated current list of publications on film. (<http://www.kameraarkasi.org/sinema/kitaplar.html>).
5. *Lost films can be recovered.* It is often argued that all the original copies of Turkish films made before 1950 were accidentally destroyed by fires at state-run archives or in municipal storage facilities. There are even reports that due to the shortage of materials during World War II,

most film prints were melted down and turned into shoe heels in the 1940s. It is said that later, in the 1970s, film producers also ordered film labs to destroy film prints in order to extract silver (see Hizlan 2012). Even though some films are lost, there are individuals who have kept old films in storage, and these may one day be discovered by researchers. Collectors could be approached by guaranteeing the preservation of films. State-private enterprise collaborations could be asked to restore and re-release classics of Turkish cinema and open their archives for film historians. There are two sources for the movies shown on television today, namely, film producers who store their own negatives and the MSU Cinema TV Central Archive established by Sami Şekeroğlu in 1975. With the assistance of the World Cinema Fund led by Martin Scorsese and Fatih Akın, several Turkish film classics have been restored (such as Metin Erksan's *Dry Summer*). The process is long and expensive, but has encouraged private corporations—Yapı Kredi Bank restored Muhsin Ertuğrul's *Halıcı Kız*—and the Ministry of Culture to do more about film restoration.

6. *Avoid rejection of heritage.* Previous histories of Turkish cinema have to be carefully studied to avoid further factual errors.
7. *Institutionalisation.* Long-term academic research design must be developed through collaboration with universities and other institutions based on a long-term digital humanities programme.
8. *Films should be made accessible.* All Turkish films should be collected in a research centre, negatives should be restored and presented to the public on a need-by-need basis, and DVDs of restored films should be produced. BFI Southbank could serve as an example for the creation of such an institution.
9. *Film and crew databases must be created.* There should be a website about Turkish cinema with inclusive content written in multiple languages. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) could serve as an example.
10. *Copyright problems must be resolved.* The fair-use clause must be legally defined for researchers who need to study scenes from films.
11. *Other sources must be made accessible.* Film set photographs, company balance sheets, import-export records, posters and screenplays should be preserved and easily accessible to researchers.

After making sure that authentic copies of films are ready to use, we can then think about which method of history writing listed below to adopt should be used, which are all useful in different ways.

What Kind of History?

The current categories of the history of Turkish cinema can be divided into the different approaches below:

- a) *Popular journalistic history*: The study of Turkish film stars and their impact on audiences. Mesut Kara and Agah Özgüç have been the most productive in this regard.
- b) *A history of film criticism*: Atilla Dorsay leads the way in collecting film criticism thematically on Turkish cinema.
- c) *History of firsts*: Individual memories and observations. Cemil Filmer (1984) and other veterans of Turkish cinema have published personal memoirs (Akad, Refiğ, Ün). The most recent is by Fikret Hakan (2010).
- d) *History of film periods*: This type of history is written by isolating a turning point in political-social-legal change. Esin Berktaş (2010) has written one such study of the 1940s. SİYAD, the Turkish film critics association, started writing a book series on film decades released every year at the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival. There are currently volumes only on the 1960s and the 1970s.
- e) *History of reception*: Currently, there are books on old film theatres (Gökmen 1989, 1991; Beyru 1996; Makal 1999; Akçura 2004) and a detailed study of the cultural history of exhibition by Serpil Kirel (2005).
- f) *Thematic histories*: Film history written on themes such as women or genres. Agah Özgüç has written about genres (2005), and Giovanni Scognamillo and Metin Demirhan have written about erotic films (2002) and fantasy films (2005).
- g) *Economic history*: Very recent studies by economists are bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative research (Tunç 2012). New websites such as boxofficeturkiye.com promise to retroactively enter all box office data soon.

The above kinds of history writing can be classified into two approaches. The first of these is subjective, an arbitrary approach resulting from filmmakers' or film critics' interest in cinema and their opportunity to write and get their pieces published. The second is a doctrinal approach about Turkish history writing. Echoing the Republic of Turkey's official version of history, historical societies (TTK-Türk Tarih Kurumu/Turkish Historical Association) and school textbooks are didactical, praising

political successes while omitting social history. An elitist history of firsts is created (first director, first colour film, first censored film, and so on). In this version of history, cinema is created by an intellectual elite whose members' artistic achievements are not understood by the public, and who are punished by the state for their political and artistic stance. It is impossible to make such grand definitive statements in history writing. Each generation of historians develops theories according to their need to comment on history. A combination of qualitative and quantitative history could be seen as a cure for the prevalence of didactic history writing. While gathering correct and authentic film credits, and economic data, oral histories and social history could also be written. Social historical methods that could be used in the history writing of Turkish cinema are as follows:

1. *Oral history*: As mentioned above, interviews should be sought with people who worked in Turkish cinema and in comparing them a synthesis could be made. İbrahim Türk's interviews with Halit Refiğ (2001) and Bülent Oran (2004) offer a promising future for this approach. Mithat Alam Film Centre's Oral History Project has produced thirteen DVDs of interviews from the classic period of Turkish cinema, and this project continues today. The MSU Film and TV Centre has an abundance of video interviews recorded by Turkish film directors since 1975. These recordings are closed to the public and should be transcribed for future researchers.
2. *Industrial history*: Subcategories of history writing should be focused on observations of the relationship between producers and consumers. Audience research using past data could also be carried out.
3. *Periodisation from other angles*: This should be done not only according to great political events, but also technological, economic, social and artistic criteria. Researchers such as Douglas Gomery, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Richard Allen, Robert Sklar and Janet Steiger who worked on the golden era of American cinema each studied a specific period of the age in a detailed way. 1952-1977, Turkish cinema's golden age, could be studied in this way as well. But it should not be forgotten in the history writing of Turkish cinema that the use of the Turkish language will be determinative. Related concepts are directly linked to the language of the researcher as well as to history and cinema history studies. A film history based on concepts borrowed from French and American-based methods could be misleading.
4. *Local history writing*: Local, regional cinema cultures must be studied. It is possible to coordinate local citizens and high-school students to

study the history of cinema in their neighbourhoods.

5. *Institutional history*: A history of Turkish film unions, associations, film festivals and film movements could be written.
6. *History of technology*: A history could be written based on areas of expertise pertaining to Turkish cinema in regard to the history of technology, as well as the history of how cinematographers, editors, sound and light technicians, and projectionists started unique practices and using various technologies in Turkish cinema. For example, when was the jump cut introduced in Turkish cinema? What was the impact of Gani Turanlı (Director of Photography) and Mevlüt Koçak (editor) on Turkish cinema? How did Western cinema technologies penetrate Turkey? Have there been any contributions to film technology by Turkish filmmakers? Did Turkish technicians make different hybrid cameras, cinemascope lenses and dollies?
7. *Economic history*: Records of import and export numbers are important in recovering the total economic output of Turkish cinema. Screening statistics of foreign films in Turkey might be accessed by researching the archives of export companies in Europe, Hollywood and other countries' cinemas (Gürata 2004).
8. *Turkish cinema overseas*: How about films produced by Turks abroad? Or Turkish films exported to other countries? A history of expatriate Turkish directors (Vedat Örfi Bengü in Egypt), actors (Muzaffer Tema, Kuzey Vargin, Salih Güney, Derya Arbaş, Tuba Ünsal in Hollywood) and their films could also be written.
9. *Biographies*: Definitive detailed historical biographies of actors and directors are also waiting to be written.
10. *Aesthetic/Stylistic history*: How did certain styles develop in Turkish cinema? Why are there so many wide shots in 1950s films? Why do zoom-ins suddenly appear in the 1970s? Why are colours so different in the 1960s? All of these questions are valid and should be examined in research taking an aesthetic approach.

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